Unit .06

Session .01

An Image of Idolatry

Scripture

Exodus 32:1-14

1 When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming
down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron
and said to him, "Come, make gods for us who will go
before us because this Moses, the man who brought
us up from the land of Egypt—we don't know what
has happened to him!" **2** Aaron replied to them, "Take
off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives,
your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me."
3 So all the people took off the gold rings that were on
their ears and brought them to Aaron. **4** He took the
gold from them, fashioned it with an engraving tool,
and made it into an image of a calf. Then they said,
"Israel, these are your gods, who brought you up from
the land of Egypt!" **5** When Aaron saw this, he built an
altar in front of it and made an announcement: "There
will be a festival to the LORD tomorrow." **6** Early the
next morning they arose, offered burnt offerings, and
presented fellowship offerings. The people sat down
to eat and drink, and got up to party. **7** The LORD
spoke to Moses: "Go down at once! For your people
you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted
corruptly. **8** They have quickly turned from the way I
commanded them; they have made for themselves an
image of a calf. They have bowed down to it, sacrificed
to it, and said, 'Israel, these are your gods, who brought
you up from the land of Egypt.'" **9** The LORD also said
to Moses: "I have seen this people, and they are indeed
a stiff-necked people. **10** Now leave me alone, so that
my anger can burn against them and I can destroy
them. Then I will make you into a great nation."
11 But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God:
"LORD, why does your anger burn against your people
you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power
and a strong hand? **12** Why should the Egyptians say,
'He brought them out with an evil intent to kill them
in the mountains and eliminate them from the face
of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger and relent
concerning this disaster planned for your people.
13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and
Israel—you swore to them by yourself and declared, 'I
will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the
sky and will give your offspring all this land that I have
promised, and they will inherit it forever.'" **14** So the
LORD relented concerning the disaster he had said he
would bring on his people.

Intro Options

Main Point:
Idolatry happens when we worship something or someone else besides God.

Option 1

Every classic Disney movie includes a significant moment that drives the action in the film. These moments center on the main character expressing his or her greatest desire. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle craves a grand life outside of her small town. In *Robin Hood*, Robin is in love with Maid Marian and wants to be with her. In *The Emperor's New Groove*, Kuzco wants a summer home to show off his riches and power.

- **What are some "I want" moments in your favorite stories? What things do you want most?**

This is true in our lives as well, whether we realize it or not. We are driven by our desires. We reveal what we truly want through our words and deeds. It is evident in what we talk about, how we spend our time, how we use our resources, and what we post on social media.

But it doesn't stop there. Our desires reveal quite a bit about us—our hopes and dreams, our goals, our fears, and ultimately who or what we worship. Usually the things we want are good, such as marriage, children, a job or financial security, a place to call home, and to make a difference. But sometimes instead of allowing our desires to drive us to God, the One who provides all we need, we worship those desires. Idolatry didn't just exist in the days of the Old Testament; it exists today within our hearts.

Option 2

Provide each student with a piece of paper. Ask students to list their "top two" in each of the following: people they'd like to meet, experiences they'd like to have, places they want to visit, and things they'd like to have. On a whiteboard or poster-board in a central location, write out any common answers students give.

- **Why did these people, experiences, places, and things make it on your list?**
- **When are you most likely to focus completely on one of these people, experiences, places, or things?**

While God meant for us to enjoy His creation, we were not meant to enjoy anything more than Him. If anything takes His place in our lives, it is an idol. Sometimes idols sneak up on us; we don't recognize them until they have taken over a part of our lives. But we can fight this temptation by focusing fully on God, and asking His forgiveness when we mess up.

TEACHING PLAN

All of us are worshipers. It's just a matter of what we worship: Whatever captivates our hearts and influences our lives. Worship is like a river forging a path through the Grand Canyon—it's always moving. We're always worshiping, but the direction of our worship changes based on what we're focused on and what we want most that day.

- **What are some objects of worship for people today?**

For the children of Israel in the Book of Exodus, the river of worship had cut a path toward the pagan gods in their land of captivity. Through the Ten Commandments, God taught His people to worship Him by faith, without relying on what they could see or touch to maintain their relationship with Him. Yet, the people weren't satisfied. They wanted something good: God's presence. However, they sinfully wanted His presence on their own terms.

Read Exodus 32:1-6.

On the surface, the Israelites' failure in creating and worshiping a golden calf was breaking the first and second commandments. But like all sin, the problem ran much deeper than that. The golden calf was not an outright rejection of God. The people were trying to worship God through what they had made.

- **What do you think of when you hear the word *idol*? In what ways do we still deal with idols today?**

The people's intention may have been in the right place and the ultimate object of their worship may have been the Lord, but their worship fell apart and lapsed into idolatry because they were focused on what they wanted—a god they could have on their own terms—rather than the Lord Himself. The means of worship matters as much as the object of worship. God has called on His people to worship only Him, only in the way He has prescribed.

The scene in Exodus 32 quickly shifted from the foot of the mountain where the people were throwing a party for their handmade god to the conversation between God and Moses. A piece of gold fashioned to look like a cow didn't know thousands of people were worshiping it, but the God who seemed so far away knew.

Read Exodus 32:7-10.

- **Why do you think God was angry with the people?**

If God's response to the people's idolatry seems extreme, it's because we don't understand the weight of our rebellion against God. Our God, perfectly holy and perfectly just, will not tolerate sin. This is why the people's idolatry could not be dismissed. This is why God did not look upon the wayward worship by a people who were still coming to know Him as a minor infraction. The people's idolatry was direct, open rebellion against Him.

- **What do you expect to satisfy you? What do you do when it fails to truly satisfy?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Idolatry happens when we worship something or someone else besides God.

Exodus 32

32:1-6. God's people today are still prone to idolatry; the idolatry just looks different. We have replaced pagan practices with the desires of the heart. Our worship of God is not laced with objects of gold, but with objects of comfort, security, and acceptance. This doesn't mean we should never desire these things; on the contrary, it means we are to put our desires in the right places. Yes, we can desire health, relationships, and jobs. However, when those desires begin to captivate us, when we begin to trust them for things only God can give, and when we elevate them to a God-like status in our lives, our desires have become deeply rooted idols in our hearts.

Idols are things that captivate our hearts or imaginations. The people may have been at Mount Sinai, but their hearts were still in Egypt, enslaved to sin. They wanted to be certain that God would lead them to their homeland, but this desire turned their hearts back to the idolatry of the Egyptians. Our passions and desires lead us to run away from God and into conflict with one another, because our desires create little idols we hope fulfill something we think we need (Jas. 4). We try to manufacture our own custom god: one who looks like us, sounds like us, and wants the same things we want.

It is important for us to recognize idols aren't God. This seems simple, but think for a second about common idols today. Think about the idols in your life. How do they compare to God? The God who created the world and everything in it; the God who became a person so we could know Him and be forgiven of our sin; the God who promises life to us. How do these idols compare to Him? He's far bigger and more beautiful than we can ever imagine. Yet we try to reduce Him to the size of the gifts He gives. We want God's blessing, but we want it on our terms. The things that seem so big to us, like having enough money, are so small to Him. But every single idol leads us to the same place: open rebellion against the God who created us and has promised to provide for us.

99 Essential Doctrines *(p. 88, DDG)*

Guilt and Shame

Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matt. 5:21-22; Jas. 2:10). Shame is the emotional pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.

TEACHING PLAN

In God's eyes, our idols show our rebellion against Him—we'd rather die getting our own way than trusting Him. Only God truly knows what we need, and only He can be trusted to give us what we need. But in our foolishness, we turn our backs to God so we can get a created thing that will never satisfy our desires.

The idols of our hearts likewise seek to steal God's glory. They make our desires the most important part of the story. More precisely, they make us the most important part of the story. But God didn't create us for our glory—He made us for His glory (Isa. 43:7). Our idols will always fall short of what we expect them to do because they are created things meant for our enjoyment, not our fulfillment. In this way, our idolatry makes us like the woman at the well in John 4—always drinking water and never being satisfied.

The only way for the Israelites to be reconciled to God was for God to show mercy to these undeserving people. Enter Moses: God's chosen mediator between Himself and His wayward people.

Read Exodus 32:11-14.

Instead of agreeing with God's proposed plan, Moses countered God and came to the people's defense, which is what God desired from him in this moment. Moses reminded God that He had rescued Israel and of His purpose in doing so—to bring glory to Himself. How would God be glorified by the Egyptians and other nations seeing Him rescue His people only to slaughter them in the wilderness? Moses asked God to forgive His people of their sin instead of wiping them out and reminded Him of the promises He had made to the rightful patriarchs of the people—Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Moses did not try to dismiss the seriousness of the people's sin (Ex. 32:31), and he was angered by it too (Ex. 31:19,22). He was not calling on God to ignore their sin, but to cover it with His grace—the grace he had witnessed God pour out so many times before. Moses even went as far to offer for God to take his life as a substitute if punishment was required (Ex. 32:32). The people's hearts may have been far from God (as shown in their idolatry), but Moses' heart was not.

- **When have you asked someone to pray for you? How did it encourage you to know someone was making requests to God on your behalf?**

Moses' mediation proved effective as God relented from His just condemnation. While it may appear that God changed His mind here, God's plan all along was to glorify Himself by showing mercy to His people. Yes, God is completely just and sin will not go unpunished, but God is also forgiving. He is not required to forgive the people's sin against Him, yet it is His character, to which Moses appealed, to forgive.

Moses' mediation for the Israelites offers us a glimpse of God's greater plan to offer forgiveness through a better mediator centuries later. Another mediator would also stand between God and the sinners who deserved His judgment and would offer His life in exchange for theirs. Jesus came into the world fully God and fully man, visible proof that God is with His people.

- **Who will you pray for who needs salvation? How will you point them to Jesus this week?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Idolatry happens when we worship something or someone else besides God.

Exodus 32

32:7-10. Notice how the Israelites talked about this little golden cow they had made in verses 4-5. Both Aaron and the people worshiped this detestable cow as if it singlehandedly had rescued them from slavery. They knew better. It was not a calf that had provided deliverance from the land, it was the sacrifice of a lamb. It was not a calf forged from the fire that had guided them, it was a pillar of fire. Whether or not the people thought they were worshiping the one true God is irrelevant, because they broke God's second commandment, if not the first commandment as well.

Many parents teach their children that direct disobedience or direct defiance means they have no excuse for their rebellion. A child who knows what is right and wrong, and still chooses to do what is wrong or not to do what is right cannot plead ignorance. We don't directly disobey by mistake, we do it on purpose every time. Each time we do, we reveal the rebellious heart within us that willfully made the wrong choice.

Idolatry is so terrible not only because we reject God, but because we often seek our own glory from the very gifts God has given us. Remember the gold the people of Israel took on their way out of Egypt, the plunder God allowed them (Ex. 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-36)? It was meant for the tabernacle—a true visual reminder that God was present and dwelling with His people—but they took that gold meant for God's glory and used it for their own glory instead. Their golden calf robbed God of the glory due Him.

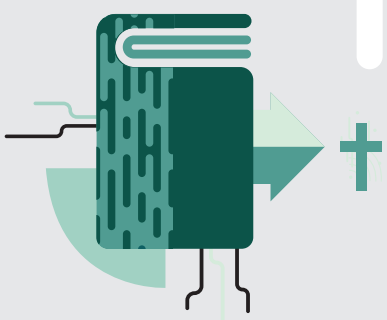
Activity

After the lesson, give each student a writing utensil and a small sheet of paper. Tell them this story: Imagine you're sorting through boxes in your parents' or grandparents' attic. You're finding all kinds of stuff and feel like you're on the show American Pickers. One of the things you find is an old lamp. When you rub it to read the writing on it, lo and behold, out pops a genie. However, your excitement is tempered as the genie explains the situation: He's a specialized genie, not like the one in Aladdin. As a specialized genie, he can grant you five wishes instead of three, but those wishes must be for other people. In other words, you don't get to wish anything for yourself.

Ask students to write out those five wishes. Tell them to look at their lists from the beginning of the exercise. Are most of those wishes "daily bread" wishes (for physical things, or for things in this life)? Are any of them "spiritual" wishes for people to experience the great joy that is God himself? Give them the chance to rewrite their five wishes, if they want. Explain they have just created prayer lists for others.

(p. 90, DDG) Christ Connection

When the children of Israel sinned, they needed a mediator (Moses) to intercede on their behalf. Jesus Christ is the perfect Mediator between God and sinful humanity, and He faithfully intercedes on behalf of His people.



AN IMAGE OF IDOLATRY

Exodus 32:1–14

AN IMAGE OF IDOLATRY

Idolatry happens when we worship something or someone else besides God.

JESUS CONNECTION

When the Israelites sinned, Moses interceded for them, but he was only a temporary mediator. Jesus Christ is the perfect Mediator between God and sinful people, and He faithfully intercedes for His people.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

LOYALTY – Choosing to stay committed, devoted and faithful to someone.

HEAD

While Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites broke their loyalty to God by doing what?

How did Moses show loyalty to the Israelites?

HEART

God had just rescued the people from slavery in Egypt in miraculous ways. What do you think made the Israelites give up on God instead of staying loyal to Him?

What makes it easy or hard to stay loyal to a friend? What everyday practices make it easier for you to stay loyal (committed, devoted and faithful) to your friends? What would make it easier or harder to stay loyal to God?

HANDS

Even though we can't earn it and don't deserve it, God is always loyal to us because of who He is. He selflessly loves us so much that He sent His own son to die for us. Jesus now intercedes for us like Moses did for the Israelites. God's loyalty to love us promises to never abandon those who believe in Him.

Create a physical reminder (a necklace, bracelet, art piece, note on your bathroom mirror, etc.) to remind you of God's loyalty. When you see it, think about who God is and ask Him to help you stay committed, devoted and faithful to Him, the One who made you and loves you unconditionally.